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Keith Negus, *Bob Dylan*

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Popular Music and Human Rights

scholar interested in issues of popular music and the ways it can be used by groups to press for what they perceive to be their rights.

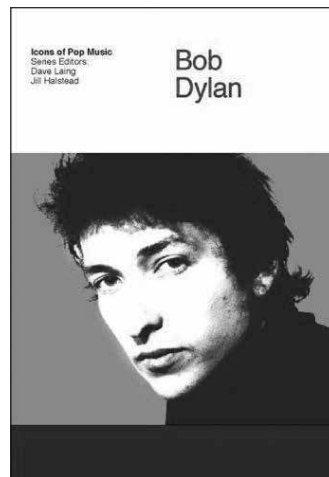
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Hazel MARSH

Keith Negus, *Bob Dylan*, Londres, Equinox, 2008.

When, during a performance in 1964, Bob Dylan was recorded referring to a "Bob Dylan mask", he provided a perfect soundbite for later critics keen to highlight the artist's seemingly deliberate manipulation of his audience's expectations. Keith Negus's short, lucid analysis of Dylan as popular music icon opens with a discussion of the mask quip, the importance granted to it by previous Dylan commentators and the usefulness of biographical information in explaining the work of public figures. To begin with, Negus neatly sidesteps the relationship between text and context by focussing on "the experiences and surroundings that allowed [Dylan] to pursue a musician's life and create himself as Bob Dylan the performer and songwriter" (8). A number of



these experiences will be familiar to the well-versed Dylan fan, though Negus's focus on the sonic elements of Dylan's surroundings makes for a refreshing change. Drawing on Schafer's notion of the "soundmark", Negus notes how certain aspects of the Minnesota landscape and soundscape imprinted themselves in Dylan's imagination and shaped the sounds in his head.

Having noted some of the important ways in which Dylan became a musician, Negus devotes a section of his first chapter to how Dylan became a recording artist. He usefully highlights the under-represented importance of music industry individuals in promoting Dylan's career. The common dismissal of the industry as a faceless corporate monolith is, Negus argues, both inaccurate and unhelpful in determining how artists come to make the decisions they make. In Dylan's case, the creative role played by figures such as *New York Times* critic Robert Shelton, Columbia executive John Hammond and Dylan's manager Albert Grossman should not be underestimated. Such personal relationships may also account for why artists stay with certain recording and management companies; Dylan has been with Columbia since the release of his first album, only briefly deserting the label in the early 1970s.

Like other writers (Williams, 1990; Marshall, 2007), Negus is keen to portray Dylan as a performing artist first and foremost. Chapter 2, structured according to a mostly chronological account of Dylan's career, supplements many of the recorded works mentioned with accounts of how Dylan subsequently adapted his material. It's an interesting, if occasionally distracting, strategy for promoting Dylan as reconfigurer of extensive bodies of work – his own and those

that have inspired him. It also calls to mind Theodor Gracyk's (1996) critique of Paul Williams, namely that the emphasis placed by Williams on Dylan's live performances was only possible due to there being available recordings of the concerts. Such recordings still exist but access to them has been curtailed to a greater extent than Negus might have imagined when preparing his text (for example, via the removal of material from the YouTube and Spotify websites and the tight control maintained over the sound samples on the artist's official website). Taking their place has been an ever-expanding set of official "Bootleg Series" albums which show Sony/Columbia to be very adept at capitalizing on Dylan's performative fluidity.

That said, Negus's "Chronologies" chapter helps to strengthen one of the main aims of his book, to treat Dylan's work to a more complete musicological consideration than it usually receives. This is ably continued in the chapter on "Traditions", which explores Dylan's indebtedness to a variety of American vernacular styles and processes. Again, the emphasis on process rather than product seems appropriate for a subject who has insisted on *becoming* rather than *being* an artist. Yet it also misses the meanings that Dylan has had for certain constituencies who, for whatever reasons, needed to fix him to a particular style, genre, social movement or historical moment. Faith in something believable must occasionally triumph over the ambiguity of the mask and perhaps we Dylanologists need to face up to the fact that we do want to fix this intriguing man, even as we are drawn to his nomadic qualities.

By chapters 4 and 5, on lyrics and music respectively, it is clear that Negus wishes to

Bob Dylan

rescue Dylan from writers and listeners who he believes have fixed particular meanings to him, his work or both. Negus is clearly annoyed with many efforts to decipher Dylan's lyrics, especially those that have approached lyrical analysis through the lens of literary criticism and those that have attempted to connect Dylan's lyrics to his life or to a range of supposed influences in world literature. From the "lit crit" school, Negus singles out Christopher Ricks's "imaginative poetics", Michael Gray's vexations about sloppy language usage and Andrew Muir's "moralizing censure" of Dylan's work (99-104). While it is questionable whether these interpreters offer as fixed and fixing an account of Dylan as asserted by his critique, Negus makes a number of valid points about the problems of dealing with song lyrics as written words rather than musicalized and vocalized utterances. There are myriad ways in which words can have their meanings changed when sung, moaned, stretched and broken beyond written and spoken conventions, something Dylan has been notably aware of throughout his singing career. As Negus notes, "The lyric may lead the voice, but the voice can lead the lyric astray" (123).

The emphasis on the sonic dimensions of Dylan's song texts continues into the final chapter, where Negus challenges previously published opinions about the simplicity and even non-musicality of Dylan's work. He does this via

an interesting discussion of the role played by various melodic intervals – particularly the minor third – in popular music texts and by focussing on the rhythmic aspects of melody. He is able to show, with support from various comments made by Dylan during his career, that there is a constant desire on Dylan's part to explore the musical potential of his work, to reinvigorate melodic patterns and find new ways to connect his music to his audience.

All in all, Negus's book is a valuable addition to Dylanology, to Equinox's ongoing "Icons of Popular Music" series and to popular music studies more generally. It packs a lot into a short text without sacrificing clarity or critical bite. In many ways, it provides a model for a serious yet outward-facing scholarly study of a popular musician.

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